

**Interviewee: Alfonso Abeyta**

**Date: 02.09.2016**

**Location: The Abeyta Ranch, Mogote, CO**

**Time: 9:00am**

**Interview available at: <https://goo.gl/AlmdAU>**

How long has farming and ranching been in your family?

What types of animals do you have? What types of crops do you grow?

What are your fondest memories of farming and ranching growing up?

Did you grow up speaking Spanish or English at home?

Do you still speak Spanish today?

What are some of the common phrases and words that you use in Spanish?

When was the first time you remember being treated differently because of your language or the color of your skin?

I understand that you served in the military. What branch did you serve in?

Were you the first in your family to serve in the military?

Where did you serve?

Did serving in the military change your perspective on things as you came back home?

When you came home did you immediately get back into ranching and farming?

Why are bank loans so important to ranchers and farmers?

As a rancher, how would one apply for these loans?

Do you remember when you started to notice that you were getting treated differently than other farmers and ranchers applying for loans? Can you think of examples? What types of things stood out to you?

How long had this been going on?

How did being rejected for loans affect your business? How much do you think you lost in terms of forgone income?

How did losing loans affect you personally? How did you feel after being turned down for a loan? And how did it affect the family?

I understand that you worked in Pueblo for many years. Why did you go to Pueblo to work? Did you want to go? Or did circumstances force you to go?

Do you think you would have needed to go to Pueblo if you had been issued the loans you applied for over the years?

When did you first start speaking out about the discrimination you'd been experiencing? When did you decide you'd had enough?

When did you become aware of the *Garcia v. Vilsack* case? How did you get involved?

Did you meet with other Hispanic farmers and ranchers about the *Garcia* case? How did their stories influence you?

What did you have to show in order to be considered for compensation under the *Garcia* case?

Did you ever receive compensation? If so, how much?

Do you think your compensation makes up for the financial and emotional losses you experienced over the years?

Did this experience of discrimination change you in any way? Did it change your family? If so, how?

What message would you want to give future farmers from the Hispanic community?

## Excerpt from interview with Alfonso Abeyta:

Alfonso: “Oh, I think, I’ve been in Antonito for 77 years now and it’s changed very little. You know we get a bad rap in Antonito but we have the, we are very, very clannish. We’ll talk about each other but don’t anybody else talk about you! Ok? We’re very, very close when it comes to cultural and stuff like that. And you’ve probably noticed that with Aaron. And that’s the same. You know, we, that’s the way our fathers and grandfathers survived. Because they were, when they had cut hay or put up hay the whole community would get together and help em. And, like in Canyon, I live uh 2 miles West from here and I remember that my dad always had sheep and cows, you know not very many cows but he used to have milk cows. The whole community would get milk and they’d make butter but when my dad needed help they’d all get together and help him. And that’s how they survived the depression.”

[This is a very powerful exchange because it reveals the importance of community ties within ranching and agricultural communities. Unfortunately, as young people leave the community, these ties begin to unravel, which makes the type of life that people like Alfonso’s father lived harder to obtain.]

Interviewee: You know, Tori was talking early about how up in Capulin you know a lot of times they would do the sheeping and the sheering as a community. Did that happen here as well?”

Alfonso: “Oh yeah, as you can see, you see all these guys that are helping here right now, they’re all volunteers. They’re not, we don’t hire them, they just come because they wanna help them. See, money to my people is secondary is they way I look at it. As long as we got enough to eat and a place to stay, we were happy. You can’t live without money but at the same time to me it’s not important.”

[This really gets to the root of it. Money was far less central to ranching and farming in the past. Today, profit margin is everything. In the past, staying afloat was the important part.]

Interviewee: “Why do you think that’s changed for so many young people?”

Alfonso: “Because of the fast life. You know you, like, for example, they ask me would you wanna go to the good ol days? No. Who would wanna go out to the out house in the middle of the winter, ok? Those are examples. You don’t wanna go back and the young generation they’re used to the good life and they don’t want to have to sacrifice or it’s just nature. And uh, you know like Antonito we get a bad rap about durgs and all that but it’s not any different than it is in big cities. It’s the same. You know. In fact, our people used to use marijuana for medicine. For arthritis, for different things. It wasn’t illegal, it wasn’t illegal, so they used to use marijuana for that but then some of them did get hooked up to where they needed it everyday and stuff like that but uh it isn’t any different than it was 70 years ago. You know, it’s just part of life.”

## ***02.09.2016 Notes from Alfonso Abeyta interview:***

Alfonso Abeyta was one of the principle applicants in Southern Colorado on the historic *Garcia v. Vilsack* lending discrimination case. In addition to applying for retribution, he worked hard to spread the word with other farmers in the region. In time, the San Luis Valley came to have one of the highest payout rates in the country. In part, this is likely due to the political capital that Ken Salazar and his brother John brought to the table. Still, in large part, the high payout rate is also a product of Alfonso's tenacity.

"My father's a fighter," Aaron Abeyta told me one day in early February 2016 in his office. "He always has been."

Tori and I plan to meet with Mr. Abeyta on Tuesday, February 9<sup>th</sup> at his home in Mogote, which is just west of Antonito, where his son Aaron lives and is currently mayor. In the session I hope to look through some of the original loan documents as well as the dispositions that Mr. Abeyta submitted. According to Aaron, he wrote his father's original disposition, which describes a bit of his story and provides background information for the case. There are a number of questions I hope to ask Mr. Abeyta as well.

Tori and I spent the morning with Mr. Abeyta and his wife. They are both extremely caring individuals, and from a financial risk standpoint, they are the exact type of people one would want to loan money. Mr. Abeyta is a forward thinker, with an entrepreneurial mindset that seems to be constantly thinking about new business opportunities. After our interview Mr. Abeyta took us by the old bus depot on Main Street, which he recently purchased, and is now using to harvest hemp seeds. According to Alfonso, the hemp plants have the potential to provide the area with much more income and help local ranchers break the stronghold that Coors has over them and their production. "We have to give them some competition," he said with a smile. They plan on planting 130 acres this summer. "Hemp brings in more income than alfalfa or potatoes and it uses much less water. We live in challenging times and we need to come up with solutions. This will help our community," he said as we ducked through the plastic barrier dividing the garage from the makeshift greenhouses.

As I drove back toward Alamosa that morning I couldn't help but think about the fact that in discriminating against men and women like Mr. and Mrs. Abeyta, local power brokers not only stunted the growth of the Hispanic community, they also hurt their own community. In denying Mr. Abeyta his loans, they denied the local community the benefits of his dreams.

Toward the end of our talk Mr. Abeyta teared up as he began to tell me a story about his father.

"One winter it snowed nearly three feet."

"It was never about the money," Mr. Abeyta said near the end of our conversation. "It was about what is right."

It is impossible to know whether or not Mr. Abeyta and his wife would have realized the \$3.4 million in foregone earnings that their economist estimated but even if they had realized half of that figure, the money would have contributed to the local economy by providing local jobs, increasing tax

revenue, and in general, improving wellbeing within the wider community. With a stronger economy and more employment opportunities, fewer people would have had to leave.

In this sense, *Garcia v. Vilsack* is about much more than the individual losses of several hundred farmers. The trickle down effects of discrimination in the Southwest run much deeper than the individual plaintiffs listed in the final settlement with the USDA. The effects run throughout the community, they manifest in the foregone wellbeing of an entire community and the potentially permanent loss of an entire culture's way of life.